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ABSTRACT

Articles on teaching effectiveness for foreign teaching assistants (TAs) are presented. Topics include: adapting to the U.S. academic environment, understanding the role of the TA and gaining confidence, anticipating undergraduates' expectations, improving communication skills, and teaching laboratory classes and recitation classes. Titles and authors are: "Reflections by a Foreign TA" (Han Srinivasan); "Teaching Competency of Foreign TAs Does Not Rest on Language Alone" (Y. G-M. Lulat, J. Weiler); "Overcoming the Conflict between Asian TAs and American Students" (Toshiya Kuroda); "The TA as a Student and Teacher" (Michael J. Serino); "How to Get Along with Undergraduates" (Jack M. Witt); "Undergraduates from the Foreign TA Perspective" (Mehran Mostajir); "My Experience with Foreign TAs" (Albert Chan); "The Language Barrier Can Be Broken" (Sanjay Paul); "Communicating Without Words" (Connie Van Zelm); "Listening Is Speaking" (Sungran Cho); "How to Be a Confident Foreign TA" (Amy Chang); "Know Thy Strengths and Weaknesses" (S. Cho); "How to Become a Confident TA" (Paul A. Basinski); "Suggestions for Lab Instructors" (Robert A. Phillips); "Teaching Advanced Laboratory Courses" (Carolyn Wechter); "Respect and Enthusiasm in the Recitation" (Michael A. Biernik); "Suggestions for Recitation Instructors in the Hard Sciences" (Zoran Pazameta); and "Suggestions for Engineering Recitations" (Shabbir Aamir). (SW)

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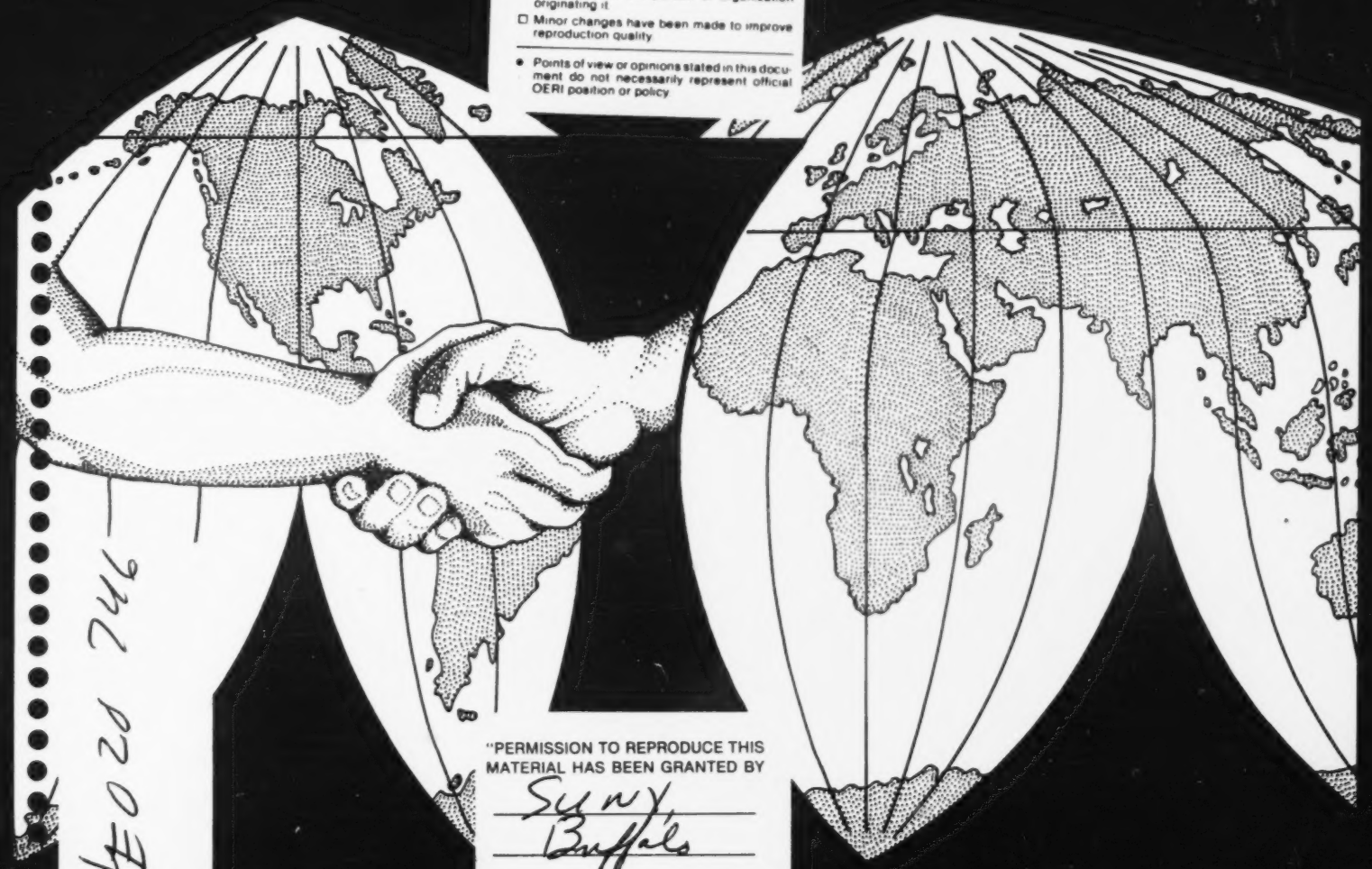

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THE FOREIGN TA:

A Guide to Teaching Effectiveness

Janice L. Gburek and Stephen C. Dunnett
Editors

Lynne M. Perkins
Illustrator

State University of New York at Buffalo
Buffalo, New York
1986

PREFACES

The State University of New York at Buffalo, UB as it is popularly known, is both large and distinguished. New York State's major public university is the largest public graduate and research center in New York and New England with 75,000 graduates living and working throughout the nation. Over 135-years-old, UB is putting the finishing touches on one of the northeast's most modern educational facilities, built at a cost of $650 million. An award-winning faculty of 4,000 full-time and affiliated instructors provide educational opportunities for over 26,000 students each year here. The University Libraries system, with 2.2 million volumes, is among the nation's top 30. More than a dozen investigative centers and institutes are part of a research effort which exceeded $50 million in expenditures in 1983-84.

UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Office of the President
Capen Hall
Buffalo, New York 14260
(716) 636-2901

August 13, 1986

Greetings:

Welcome to the State University of New York at Buffalo. I am delighted that you have joined our University and I know that the faculty and students in your graduate program are all looking forward to working with you. The opportunity to share ideas with new colleagues is one of the most exciting experiences in graduate education and research. It is equally important to learn how to communicate your knowledge and skills, and I am very pleased that you will be serving as a Teaching Assistant while you pursue your graduate studies here.

The University at Buffalo has made a major commitment to strive for excellence in the quality of our teaching. We have developed policies and programs to monitor and improve our teaching, and I believe our efforts are among the most intensive in any major research university. Your contributions as a Teaching Assistant are vital elements in the success of our undergraduate programs and it is most important that you develop the teaching skills that will give our undergraduate students the very best learning experience. Moreover, the training that you acquire as a Teaching Assistant will also help you in many ways throughout your future career. I hope you will enjoy your teaching and I wish you every success in your graduate program.

Sincerely,

Steven B. Sample
President

UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Department of Psychiatry
School of Medicine
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Erie County Medical Center
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462 Grider Street
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March 25, 1986

Dr. Stephen Dunnett
Director
Learning & Instruction
320 Baldy Hall
Amherst Campus

Dear Professor Dunnett:

I strongly endorse the development of a Guide for Foreign Teaching Assistants. Presumably, this will be a first step in what I would hope will become a comprehensive program for all non-native teaching assistants. It will surely take more than a guide to immerse these individuals into the culture of the American university.

I believe that our Center for Teaching Effectiveness has an important responsibility to all TAs, but especially to those whose high levels of competence and potential scholarship may be comprised by language deficiencies or cultural misperceptions.

I expect that the Faculty Senate will also support your efforts.

Good luck!

Sincerely yours,

Norman Solkoff (S)

Norman Solkoff, Ph.D.
Professor
Interim Director, Office
of Teaching Effectiveness

NS:ss

FOREWORD

On behalf of the faculty and staff of the Intensive English Language Institute, I am pleased to welcome you to the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Our University has a long and distinguished history in international education. We currently have over 2,000 international students from nearly 100 countries enrolled in our programs. Nearly three-quarters of the international students matriculating at SUNY/Buffalo are graduate students, and many, like you, are supporting their studies through teaching assistantships (TAs). Our university places a high value on receiving international students, for your presence here benefits our domestic students by contributing to the overall internationalization of the university community. Your assistance in the university's on-going mission in teaching and research is important and much appreciated, for without your presence our undergraduate teaching programs and overall research efforts would be seriously handicapped. We hope that you, too, will benefit from the internship experience of teaching and working with our faculty and staff.

All of us who have studied or taught overseas appreciate what an exciting and intimidating experience it can be. We admire your courage and motivation in leaving your country to study and work in the United States. Most Americans will be impressed by your English language ability, especially since so few of us can speak any language other than English.

In an effort to make your experience as a TA at SUNY/Buffalo a more rewarding and effective one, we have prepared this guide. We hope that you will find this collection of articles from American and foreign TAs and students, as well as the information on the various instructional programs and services, helpful and meaningful.

Many people have contributed to the production of this TA guide, and I would particularly like to thank the students who took time from their Spring semester studies to submit articles on their experiences. I also thank Bernice Poss, Executive Assistant to the Provost, who first suggested the idea of a guide and Provost William Greiner, who provided the support that made it possible. Special thanks are also extended to Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Education, Dr. Donald Rennie, for his efforts in the development of standards for foreign TAs and the establishment of a testing and English communication skills program. I thank all the members of the Graduate School Language Policy Action Committee for their interest and support during the past year. Over the past two years, university faculty and staff members too numerous to mention here have kindly assisted in the efforts of the Intensive English Language Institute to improve the English language skills of international TAs. Their assistance and support is much appreciated.

Finally, I extend my deepest thanks to Janice Gburek, Assistant Director for the English as a Second Language Program, who was instrumental in the realization of this project.

All the contributors to this book, as well as the staff and faculty of the State University of New York at Buffalo, join me in wishing you a very successful and rewarding experience in the years ahead.

Stephen C. Dunnett
Associate Professor & Director
Intensive English Language Institute

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INTRODUCTION

Among those who teach at the State University of New York at Buffalo, teaching assistants (TAs) hold key positions. Since they usually instruct small-group undergraduate-level classes, TAs often have more direct contact with undergraduate students than professors do. In addition, undergraduate students are more likely to consult TAs with questions regarding course content, procedures, examinations and grades, because the TAs, closer to undergraduates in age and status, may seem easier to approach than professors. TAs, therefore, must be prepared to explain policies, concepts, theories and principles presented in the course; to clarify students' misunderstandings of course content and procedures; to defend grades given for homework assignments, quizzes and examinations; and to encourage and inspire students to work to their full potential for the duration of the course.

The State University of New York at Buffalo recognizes that the quality of instruction at the University is to a large extent determined by the quality of instruction among its TAs. As evidence of the University's commitment to strive for excellence in the quality of teaching at all levels of instruction, orientation programs for new faculty and TAs have been established. Departments also assist TAs in carrying out their teaching responsibilities by providing supervision and guidance as needed. Moreover, the University has implemented procedures to evaluate and, if necessary, improve the oral communication skills of foreign TAs to ensure that they possess satisfactory English language proficiency before undertaking teaching responsibilities.

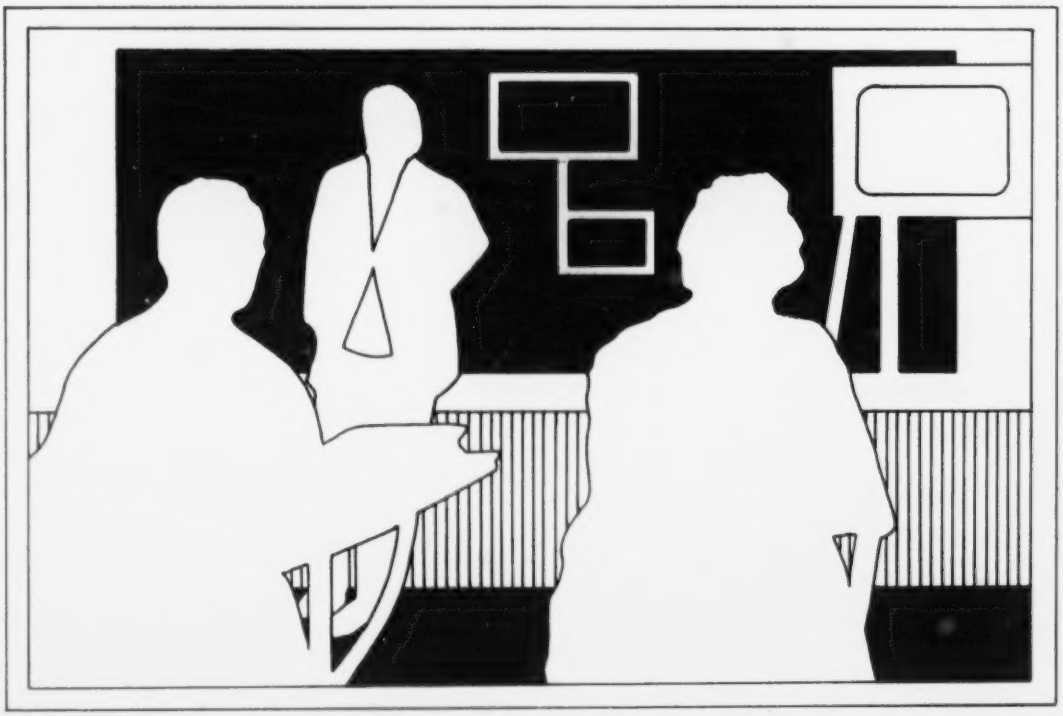
The procedures used to evaluate and improve the oral communication skills of foreign TAs involve testing and training. Newly appointed foreign TAs are required to take the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK) Test, developed by the Educational Testing Service as a means of evaluating examinees' speaking and listening skills. In accordance with English language proficiency policies formulated by the Language Policy Action Committee and approved by the Executive Committee of the Graduate School, TAs who achieve a minimum SPEAK Test score of 250 (from a total of 300) have a satisfactory level of speaking proficiency and may be assigned teaching responsibilities. TAs who achieve a score of below 200 must successfully complete the course "Communication Skills for Foreign Teaching Assistants" (ESL 512) before they can assume teaching responsibilities. TAs who achieve a score of 200-249 will also be interviewed by representatives from the English as a Second Language Program and the TA's department. Based on the results of the interview, TAs may be assigned to teaching responsibilities or may be required to successfully complete ESL 512 before teaching.

The objectives of "Communication Skills for Foreign Teaching Assistants" are to improve foreign TAs' speaking and listening skills for teaching purposes and to acquaint foreign TAs with the characteristics of undergraduate education at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Oral presentations by TAs attending the course will be videotaped so that the TAs' progress can be monitored throughout the semester. During the course, TAs will also have an opportunity to interact with American undergraduates in order to become familiar with the academic backgrounds and expectations of the students they will eventually teach.

Many factors contribute to the instructional effectiveness of foreign TAs. Satisfactory communication skills, an understanding of the American higher education system, ability to anticipate the expectations of American undergraduates, confidence as an instructor and adequate preparation for teaching are among the most important elements that lead to a successful teaching experience. This Guide to Teaching Effectiveness is a collection of articles submitted by experienced foreign and American TAs and by undergraduates who have been taught by TAs. The articles provide information, suggestions and encouragement to foreign TAs who are about to undertake teaching responsibilities at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In reading and applying the information contained in the Guide to Teaching Effectiveness, as well as in the State University of New York at Buffalo Handbook for Graduate Assistants and Fellows, foreign TAs can expect to benefit more fully from their academic and instructional experiences. As education on a global scale becomes of increasing significance, the State University of New York at Buffalo acknowledges the contributions of its foreign TAs and welcomes them as members of the University community.

Janice L. Gburek
Assistant Director
English as a Second Language Program



UNDERSTANDING THE U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

There is much variation among universities in the United States; however, some commonalities exist. Foreign students often find that the characteristics that typify the higher education system in the United States are quite different from those of universities in their own countries. Although it is important for all foreign students to recognize these differences, it is especially crucial that foreign TAs acquire an understanding of all levels of the U.S. higher education system. The foreign TAs will be studying in graduate-level programs, while their students will be American undergraduates, many of whom are also newcomers to the university. The following section provides an overview of the general structure of the university administration and faculty and of both undergraduate and graduate education in the United States.

The U.S. Higher Education System

The structure of the University system in the United States takes a number of forms. Even within a given state university system, different branch universities may employ a variety of administrative structures. Most universities have adapted their administrative structure to meet the needs of the students and to attain the objectives of the university. It may be useful, however, to examine a typical university structure from the highest administrative ranks to the instructional staff who are closest to the student perspective, teaching assistants (TAs).

At the top of the university structure is the board of trustees. The board is composed of a group of citizens who are usually influential within the community that surrounds the university. The members of the board maintain general control of the university's affairs, including financial and political matters. In order to carry out these responsibilities most effectively, the board meets periodically with the university president.

The president of the university, who is the executive officer of the board of trustees, must possess a variety of skills, for the president is at once an administrator, educator, politician, public speaker and fund-raiser. The position also requires that the president be a skilled diplomat, as he or she must often resolve conflicts between the demands of the trustees and those of the students.

A provost may be appointed to directly assist in carrying out the executive responsibilities of the office of the president. In view of this important role within the university, the provost must be both an accomplished academic and a capable administrator.

Given the heavy responsibilities that the president's office entails, many of the university's day-to-day executive decisions may also be made by vice presidents. Vice presidents are often involved in such areas as government relations, institutional publications, alumni affairs and student services, including admission, testing, student welfare, recreation and post-degree employment.

University deans manage the affairs of academic faculties and colleges. They hold faculty rank in one of the departments that they supervise. These supervisory responsibilities include overseeing faculty promotions and salaries, students' academic records and curriculum development. In addition, deans may be required to teach and conduct research.

Department chairs are professors who handle administrative affairs within their department, such as teaching assignments, course offerings, research funding, faculty recruitment and facilities. Chairs are assisted in these matters by faculty committees.

The university faculty is composed of all the teaching staff, except TAs. Included among the faculty ranks are instructors, lecturers,

assistant professors, associate professors and full professors. In addition to their teaching, professors are expected to conduct research, attract grants to support research, publish and review publications, advise students and serve on faculty committees.

Graduate assistants occupy a somewhat ambiguous role within the university structure. While they are working toward the completion of their degrees, graduate assistants are employed by the university to perform research or teaching services. Included among graduate assistants, TAs are given instructional assignments which may consist of supervising a laboratory class, teaching a recitation class, tutoring undergraduate students, constructing exams, proctoring exams or grading papers. These assignments are often made based on departmental need, rather than on the background or interest of the TA. Most TAs have little or no teaching experience, and may therefore feel overwhelmed at the sudden prospect of a classroom teaching assignment. All TAs, however, are supervised by a faculty member who provides assistance and guidance when needed.

Undergraduate Education

Throughout the typically four-year period of undergraduate education, the university attempts to facilitate students' entry into their chosen field of study by providing various levels of instruction. Freshmen (first-year) courses are designed to help students make the transition from their high school subjects to university courses that offer more in-depth perspectives. Senior (fourth-year) courses, on the other hand, prepare students for further study in graduate programs. These levels, however , are not always so clearly distinct, and within a given undergraduate-level course, one may find freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors, all enrolled in the same course, but for a variety of reasons.

Most undergraduate programs have established a "general education" policy, which requires that students take courses in a variety of academic fields in addition to courses within their major field of study. For example, all students must demonstrate proficiency in English and math. In addition, students have course requirements in social sciences, foreign languages, natural sciences and humanities. A student majoring in electrical and computer engineering, for instance, may also be registered in a French literature course. A psychology major may be taking calculus. By taking courses in departments outside their major, students receive a comprehensive education and come in contact with various academic perspectives. Moreover, students at different levels of undergraduate education can be found in the same course, so that students meet classmates of different ages and with varying degrees of educational experience.

To the extent possible, contact is also encouraged between the university teaching staff and students. Although undergraduates can hope for little or no personal attention in a large-group lecture of 200 students, professors hold office hours during which they meet individually with students to discuss academic concerns. Furthermore,

many lecture classes are accompanied by smaller laboratory or recitation classes. In these classes, students are often taught by graduate TAs who are prepared to answer students' questions on the course and lead discussions of issues relevant to the course materials. Upper-level undergraduate courses are often organized as seminars, in which the professor guides students in the discussion of specialized topics.

In all classes--lectures, laboratory classes, recitations and seminars--professors and TAs conduct classes in a somewhat relaxed, informal atmosphere, which allows them and their students to concentrate on the subject under discussion. Professors and TAs tend to dress casually, move around the classroom, maintain eye contact, smile and deliver the lecture in a conversational tone, occasionally injecting humor. In smaller classes, professors and TAs try to learn students' names so that they can address students on a personal level.

When the course organization permits, students are encouraged to ask questions, contribute to discussions and express their own opinions. Professors and TAs also feel a responsibility to assist students in developing the self-confidence that is as essential to a successful career as are professional skills. Students rarely encounter harsh criticism. Even students' incorrect answers to professors' questions are responded to with tact and respect. When a student offers an incorrect answer, the professor or TA will react with expressions such as, "Not exactly, but you're on the right track," or "Think about the question again," or "Don't forget what we talked about in the last class." In short, an undergraduate education attempts to give students the personal as well as professional skills that will serve them long after completion of their degree programs.

Graduate Education

Students at the graduate level differ from their undergraduate counterparts in that these master's and doctoral candidates are, on the whole, more committed, sophisticated and intelligent. In some cases, graduate students have often worked for several years after completion of their undergraduate degrees prior to beginning a graduate program. These students often bring to their courses valuable professional experience.

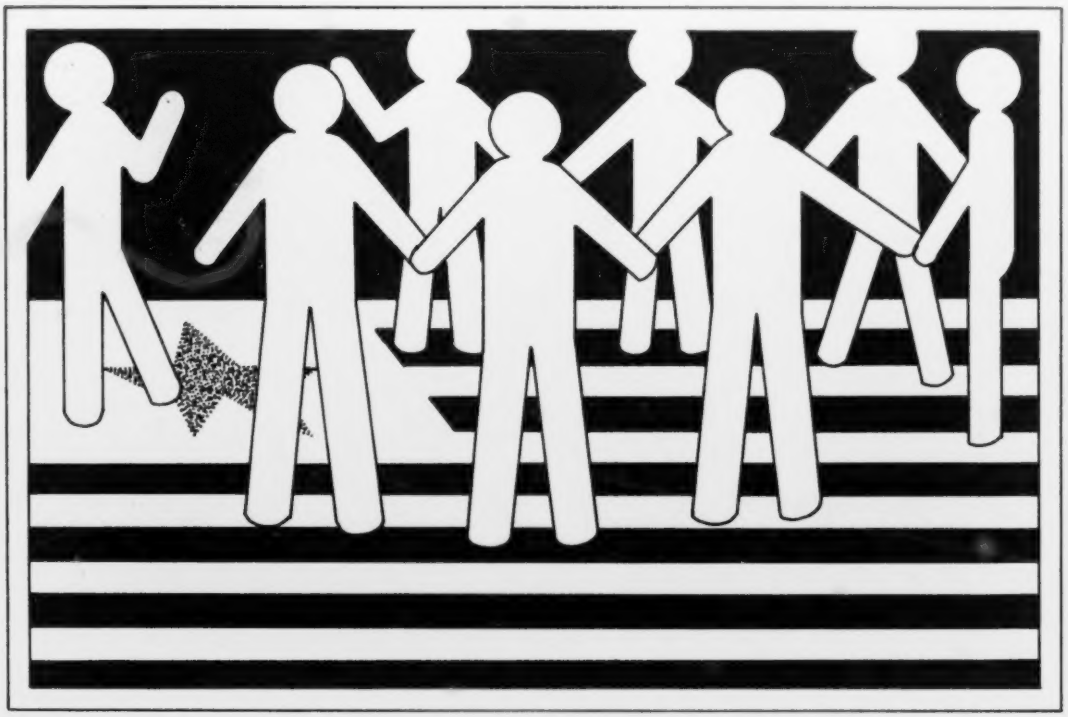
In dealing with graduate students, professors tend to be frank and critical of their students' work. Because they view these students as future colleagues, professors establish high standards of academic quality to prepare students for eventual professional assignments. Graduate courses meet less frequently than undergraduate courses, but reading requirements are very heavy, and students may be required to submit extensive written assignments.

In making the transition from an undergraduate to a master's program, students encounter more intensive requirements, more specialized course content and increased pressure to take an active role in their education. During the approximately two years of a master's degree program, students are acquainted with the current literature, ideas and methodologies within their relatively specialized field. In addition to

course requirements, the degree program may require students to complete an internship, thesis or comprehensive exams.

In addition to further coursework, a doctoral program may require mastery of one or more foreign languages, qualifying or preliminary examinations, an original research project, a dissertation and an oral exam on the subject of the dissertation. Courses at this level tend to be small and narrowly focused. Much of the responsibility for conducting the course is given to the students, who are expected to give reports and offer criticism, suggestions and comments on the subjects under discussion.*

*Information adapted from The American University: A World Guide by Gregory A. Barnes (Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1984).



ADAPTING TO THE U.S. ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Most students, both American and foreign, who enter graduate programs at U.S. universities experience some problems in adapting to this level of education. Graduate students, after all, are expected to pursue their studies with greater degrees of skill, independence and commitment than are undergraduate students. Foreign graduate TAs, however, face additional challenges. Foreign TAs must learn to function within an educational system different from that in their own country. They must also acquire an understanding of their roles as both student and instructor. As part of the university teaching staff, they face American undergraduates whose needs and expectations may be difficult for foreign TAs to anticipate. Finally, many foreign TAs find that the most difficult obstacle to overcome is language. This section suggests ways in which foreign TAs can successfully adapt to the unfamiliar environment of the U.S. university.

Reflections By a Foreign TA

Han Srinivasan

Life is full of uncertainties and the human spirit in its quest for something basically undefinable--expressed as freedom, happiness, adventure, exploration, etc.--embarks on a journey into the unknown. Foreigners come to this country with many dreams and aspirations, looking for opportunities to realize their latent potentials. Many find it; some do not. The degree of adaptability plays a major role in adjusting oneself to the new environment.

Descending from the lofty world of idealism, let me dwell on the more mundane things in life, particularly those relevant to a foreign teaching assistant. First, a little about my own background. I came to this country from India, after going through an Indianised version of the British and American system of education. Fortunately, having been tutored in English right from kindergarten, language has proved to be my greatest asset.

A fluent knowledge of English cannot be over-emphasized. Being the medium of communication here, any inadequacy can be a severe handicap. Luckily, it is not a stupendous task to acquire proficiency, provided one puts in sufficient efforts and is willing to learn. Expect to commit a number of mistakes, but keep trying to break out of your shell. The nuances in the language may be subtle, or otherwise. For example, instead of asking for the "lift" to go down to the "ground" floor (British English), I quickly learned to enquire about the "elevator" to go down to the "first" floor. Accent aside, American English and British English are not exactly the same, and those people coming from former British colonies have to change some of their spellings also--"behavior" for "behaviour," "color" for "colour," "check" for "cheque" and so on. "Traveling" and "travelling" are both acceptable spellings here!

The second important factor in adapting to the new ambiance is "accent." This is not easy, but remember that accents vary from one part of the country to another, even in the U.S., although almost everybody speaks English. Accent can be a genuine problem for students who have foreign instructors, just as a foreigner might have difficulty in understanding the American accents. So, speak slowly and clearly; if students tell you that they cannot understand what you are trying to say, repeat what you were saying, or better still, write it out, and make a real effort to communicate. Do not mistake the students to be poking fun; they can be very understanding, empathetic and a great source of support. Open-mindedness and a capacity to laugh at oneself are helpful. It is a new experience for people on either side of the table and there can be genuine problems to overcome.

Everyone is not an excellent teacher, and the ability to teach is not synonymous with the ability to speak English in front of an audience. One has to develop teaching abilities; it is a fruitful, worthwhile and rewarding experience in itself.

The third major factor which confronts a foreign teaching assistant is the distinct American education system. The instructor-student interaction falls in this domain. Unlike an educational system in which there is a distance between teachers and the taught, a teacher here is not perceived to be the fountainhead of all knowledge; the reverence for teachers that is found abroad may be diluted or even missing. The educational system here is less rigid; courses undergo constant revision and the learning process is more participatory. Students' expectations are vocalized more and students' giving their perspective on their performance and grading should not come as a surprise. It is not a questioning of the instructor's fairness or integrity and should not be mistaken to be so. Be open and always give students a fair listening. Taking feedback is very useful.

Students performing badly may find it relatively easy to shift the blame on the abilities of their instructors. Who likes bad grades? Nobody. However, if the number of complaining students is appreciable, necessary attention should be devoted to the problem, with help from the other faculty members in the department. Remember that teaching is not equivalent to facing the class and being able to speak, though these aspects in themselves may be quite daunting.

Another major dimension to teaching is the positive angle. It can be a lot of fun. It can be enjoyable. You realize how much you can learn only when you teach. What appears simple to you may not be so to anybody else in the world! It is a challenge to explain difficult concepts in an understandable manner. The interaction between instructors and students needs to be friendly. It is a gratifying experience to notice that your efforts are being appreciated by your students. A "thank you" from a student at the end of the course gives me a great feeling of being appreciated. Teaching takes on a new meaning.

How pleasant to bump into former students, so full of life and dreams, treating you as a friend, discussing new problems or just engaging in a friendly conversation. Life is rich and goes on.

Teaching Competency of Foreign TAs Does Not Rest on Language Alone

Y.G-M. Lulat & J. Weiler

It is perhaps necessary to begin by explaining that what we have to say regarding the problems that foreign TAs face here at the University at Buffalo is based on the experiences and observations of one of us as a foreign TA and the other as a teacher of English as a second language. These experiences suggest to us that the teaching problems foreign TAs face here at the University at Buffalo are not entirely rooted in the problem of poor English language competency. To be sure, there are some foreign TAs whose limited English language competency is a major obstacle to successful teaching (and below we shall have occasion to mention an example of how this obstacle manifests itself). Yet, our experiences and observations also indicate that however fluent a foreign TA may be in the English language, his/her ability to become a successful TA will depend on other factors besides possession of adequate English language competency.

One of these factors for successful teaching is a sufficient knowledge of American classroom practices, coupled with the ability to acclimatize to them. (Another factor is simply teacher training that all TAs for that matter need.) Many foreign TAs (together with their students and advisors), convinced that language is a major barrier to their success as teachers, tend to overlook this particular factor, which in our estimation is equally important as English language competency. In other words, it is critical that foreign TAs (and those who advise them) be aware that there are some important differences between classroom practices in their home countries and classroom practices here in American universities.

Before going on to mention some of these differences, however, it would not be out of place to briefly mention at this point that some of the difficulties foreign TAs face at the University at Buffalo are also in part an aspect of their very status as teaching assistants - that is, students who are also teachers. In this respect, of course, all TAs (foreign and non-foreign) share similar problems. For example, it is clear to us that undergraduates show considerable reluctance to accord TAs in general the same respect and deference that they would show to professors, given their awareness that TAs are still students (and hence, in their eyes at least, lack the authority that one associates with a fully qualified, learned teacher - that is, a professor). To put the matter differently, the position of TAs is one of inherent contradiction: they are being asked to become successful teachers (often without any training), but at the same time also retain their status as successful students. This is bound to generate problems that are independent of the status of the TA as either <u>foreign</u> or <u>non-foreign</u>.

But leaving all this aside, we wish to suggest that it is possible for foreign TAs to alleviate to some degree some of the teaching problems that they face at the University at Buffalo--specifically those that arise from their lack of awareness of the differences between American classroom practices and practices that they are familiar with in their

home country. While it is not possible, due to space limitations, to go into any extensive detail, we find the following differences in classroom practices to be of some significance, and we feel foreign TAs may be well advised to become aware of them.

1. One of the differences foreign TAs should know has to do with the matter of classroom discipline. Many foreign TAs come from educational backgrounds where the professor/teacher has all authority in the classroom (indicative of this at the simplest level is the fact that students are not expected to call their teachers by their first names), and therefore students are not allowed to question any aspect of classroom teaching or procedure. Whatever questions are asked have to be restricted to questions essentially of a clarifying nature pertaining to the course subject matter itself. American students, however, are more used to a system where they can and do raise questions, not only on the subject matter of the course, but also on how the course is being taught. This type of questioning is sometimes misinterpreted by foreign TAs to mean a challenge to their authority, and this may provoke a harsh response from the foreign TAs, which in turn will generate misunderstanding and resentment on the part of the students. On this same issue foreign TAs have to be aware, for example, of the fact that, whereas in their home countries university students would not dare question grades that they have been given for their courses, here in the U.S. students do question grades they have received if they are not satisfied with them.

2. There are other related issues in the matter of discipline that foreign TAs need to know about, such as body language, stereotyping, and general classroom discourse. What may appear to foreign TAs to be improper body language can also be a source of misunderstanding. For example, direct eye contact, considered to be appropriate and respectful here, may be embarrassing and disrespectful to the foreign TA. Foreign TAs must be especially cautious not to behave in a manner that reinforces stereotypes that are often held by students of foreign TAs, such as that Orientals are non-assertive and passive (and hence can be intimidated easily). Foreign TAs need to become attuned to the kind of spontaneous and informal discourse between students and teachers which is common in American classes and realize that, while such discourse may appear to be a game of one-upmanship by the students, it is not an attack on the foreign TA's authority, but shows, on the contrary, the students' interest and involvement.

3. Foreign TAs often come from countries where competition for admission to colleges and universities is extremely fierce because of the often severely limited number of places available. The result of this competition is that it fosters among foreign students a strong sense of commitment to their studies and a high level of motivation to succeed. This kind of commitment and motivation is not always present among undergraduates here because students in American universities tend to come from very diverse academic backgrounds, given the comparatively high level of accessibility to university education. Foreign TAs therefore must not expect all their students to show the same uniform level of commitment and motivation toward their studies as they might have

displayed when they were undergraduates. What this demands in practice is greater patience and understanding on the part of foreign TAs toward their students -- especially those who may not seem to be doing well.

4. Some foreign TAs come from countries where the academic calendar does not operate on the basis of the semester system, that is, a system where courses are of a semester length. The result is that the study/learning strategies pursued by foreign TAs when they were undergraduates is quite likely to be different from those of American students, who have to deal with semester length courses rather than academic-year length courses. And this is especially so when the difference is further compounded by the fact that American universities tend to rely comparatively more on what may be called "continuous evaluation" of students' course performance. American students, faced continually with tests, evaluation, and monitoring throughout the semester, often are inexperienced at employing self-discipline and self-motivation, whereas a foreign TA, used to a system whereby students are forced to take more responsibility for their learning progress, may expect students to be more responsible for their own progress. This can lead to serious misunderstandings where the foreign TA assumes that students are lackadaisical and unmotivated, while students may assume that the foreign TA is not doing enough to structure their learning progress. It is necessary for foreign TAs to be aware of this fundamental difference between American and non-American systems in order to better understand the American students and their expectations in the classroom.

Having said all this, however, we do need to mention one point that does have some relation to the matter of the English language competency of the foreign TA. Often there is a misperception as to exactly what words and phraseology students can and cannot understand. Foreign TAs may be more likely to use jargon familiar to them at their advanced level and not be sensitive to the fact that they may have to adjust the language level down to that of the class. This may be especially compounded, for example, in the sciences where there exists a set of standardized international terminologies which the foreign TA has been using from the beginning of his or her study at home. In the case where the foreign TA's English language competency is limited, it may be difficult to substitute more familiar terms for sophisticated jargon.

Finally, we should also mention that it seems to us that there are some students who, upon facing a foreign TA as their teacher, either consciously or sub-conciously conclude that they will not be taught well. This attitude is an outcome of an ethnocentrism that often results from lack of knowledge and contact with other peoples and cultures. This kind of obstacle that foreign TAs may run into is beyond the realm of improved teaching methods or language competency.

Overcoming the Conflict Between Asian TAs and American Students

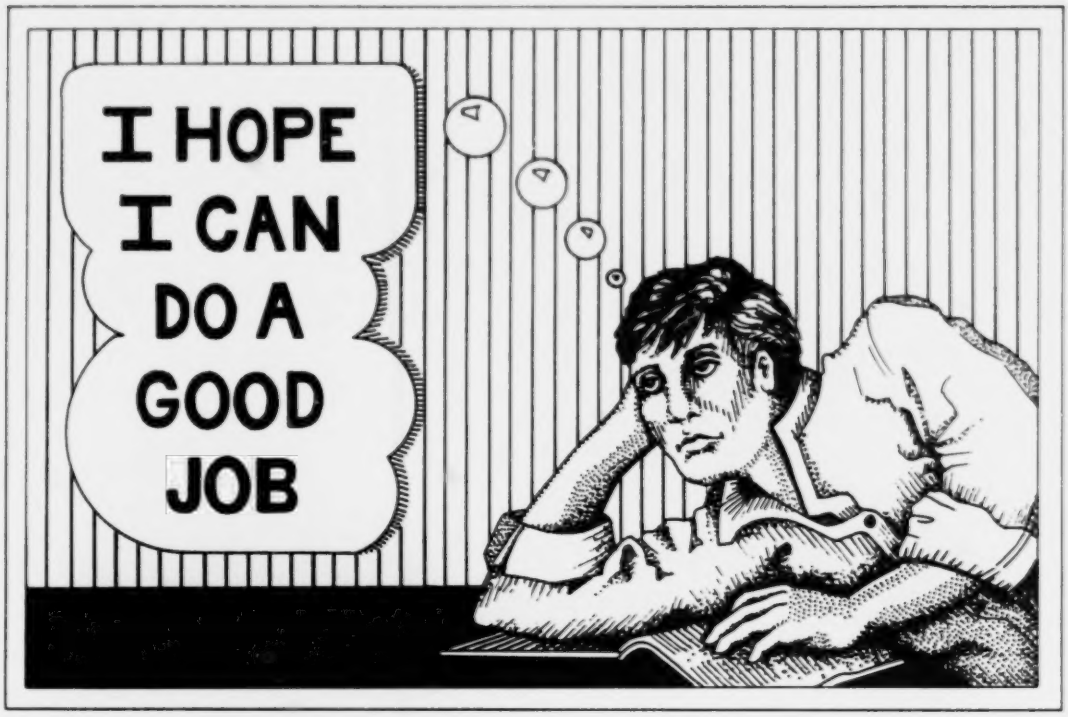
Toshiya Kuroda

In the classroom of a university, nothing seems more important to me than the relationship between teacher and students. But, unfortunately, there is a big difference between the relationship of teachers and students in the U.S. and that in Asian countries. I would like to explain the characteristics of the Asian concept of education in order to help Asian TAs avoid any minor trouble with American students.

Above all, the fundamental concept among Asian people is that education is not anything to be acquired or to be learned by students, but something to be taught by teachers. Therefore, in an Asian educational situation, the transmission of information is always unilateral in the classroom: from teacher to students. It rarely happens in an Asian classroom that teachers ask for questions about their lectures or that students question their teachers. If an Asian student had a question, he or she would probably bring it to the teacher in the teacher's office after class. Moreover, Asian students feel extremely uncomfortable with argument. Even though the students have their own opinions, they seldom present them in the classroom until they are required to do so by their teacher. Asian students, in general, tend to feign ignorance when they face discussion in an American classroom. This is not because they cannot follow the class, but because they try to avoid discussion. This is also true for Asian professors. Asian professors feel confident in their lectures as long as their students listen to them quietly. But once they are questioned or experience dissent from their students in the classroom, they feel as if they were denied their authority to lecture. This tendency results from the common Asian standard which puts priority on the harmonious relationship between a teacher and the students in the classroom. To make matters worse, if Asian TAs are not confident of their English in an American university, they have no idea how they can cope with a situation in which they are asked spontaneous questions. As a result, the more an Asian TA is questioned, the more ambiguously he or she may teach the students so as to avoid any questions. On the other hand, American students generally want to clarify everything which they do not understand then and there. As a result, an Asian TA's obscure explanation makes the American students confused and causes them to ask a lot of questions. It is a vicious cycle. The most essential thing for Asian TAs to keep in mind is that they should speak English with simple expressions and as clearly as they can. Also, it is advisable that Asian TAs say everything on their minds associated with the class, even though silence is considered to be valuable in Asia.

Furthermore, Asian TAs may become offended when they actually communicate with Americans in the classroom. Because education is something to be taught by teachers in Asia, as I stated above, there is a greater distance between a teacher and the students in Asia than in America. Asian students talk in a roundabout way, using polite expressions. But, since these very formal expressions are not used in addressing TAs here, an Asian TA should not consider the direct words expressed by American students as offensive.

Finally, I will state several specific ideas with which Asian TAs might be able to avoid any trouble with their students in an American university. First, Asian TAs should clarify the main idea or important point of their instruction at the very beginning of their class. Also, Asian TAs should avoid ambiguous expressions, and instead speak in a straightforward manner. Furthermore, I have learned from experience that American students put stress on preparation for their next classes, though they may not appear to do so. Therefore, it is crucial for TAs to prepare for instruction. It is a good idea for a TA to make an outline of the lesson in advance, which would be helpful for both TAs and their students. Because the troubles related to Asian TAs and American students result from cultural discrepancies between Asians and Americans rather than simply language difficulties, it is a good idea for Asian TAs to begin thinking like Americans, at least in the classroom.



UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE TA

The responsibilities assigned to TAs vary greatly from department to department. Nevertheless, all TAs are faced with the challenge of fulfilling their teaching responsibilities and completing their own academic workloads. Although performing the roles of instructor and student is no simple task, many TAs are grateful for the opportunity to experience the classroom from both perspectives. In fact, as students themselves, TAs are in an ideal position to develop the means to most effectively convey information to their students. The next section, meant to aid foreign TAs in understanding their role at the university, points out how TAs, as graduate students, are uniquely qualified to teach undergraduate classes.

The TA as a Student and a Teacher

Michael J. Serino

The years which a graduate student spends as a TA are often described as a sort of apprenticeship, and, to a large degree, the comparison is accurate. Like the apprentice, the TA learns and practices his or her profession simultaneously; like the apprentice, the TA often performs the same work as the more experienced professional, but at lesser financial remuneration--compensation rather taking the form of the opportunity for training and experience. And, like the apprentice, the TA often faces the cynicism of those who receive his or her services: 'Why," students ask, "should we be satisfied with the performance of a novice when we could receive instruction from someone older and more experienced?"

But this is precisely the point at which the analogy breaks down. For, unlike the apprentice craftsman, whose intermediate status between ignorance and skill has no particular positive value (and is simply a stage which must be patiently overcome), the graduate student TA, by virtue of his or her unique situation as both student and teacher, has a valuable set of qualifications to bring to the teaching assignment.

One such qualification concerns freshness of approach. Graduate students are more often than not engaged in intensive, specialized research for the first time in their academic careers. A field of concentrated study is opening up to them in depth and detail. The excitement this produces inevitably overflows into their teaching activities. For TAs are discovering the subject matter of the course being taught as well: the TA is developing a pedagogic strategy for the first time, exploring the most effective ways to present introductory material to the uninitiated student. Not yet having had the opportunity to become bored or disenchanted with the material at hand, the TA will learn a great deal in the process of preparation. Under such circumstances, even errors prove productive.

A second qualification concerns communication. Communicative ability lies at the heart of successful teaching and, in this regard, TAs are in a particularly advantageous position. Being younger than full faculty members, they are closer in age and outlook to the undergraduates they are instructing. This provides a tremendous advantage in achieving clarity by facilitating the presentation of material in familiar and accessible terms. TAs know, and often share, the daily--and more abstract--concerns of their students, and can draw on a common body of interest in laying bare the relevance of the subject matter.

How can these qualifications most effectively be translated into actual practice? Primarily by keeping them constantly in mind when establishing a relationship with one's students.

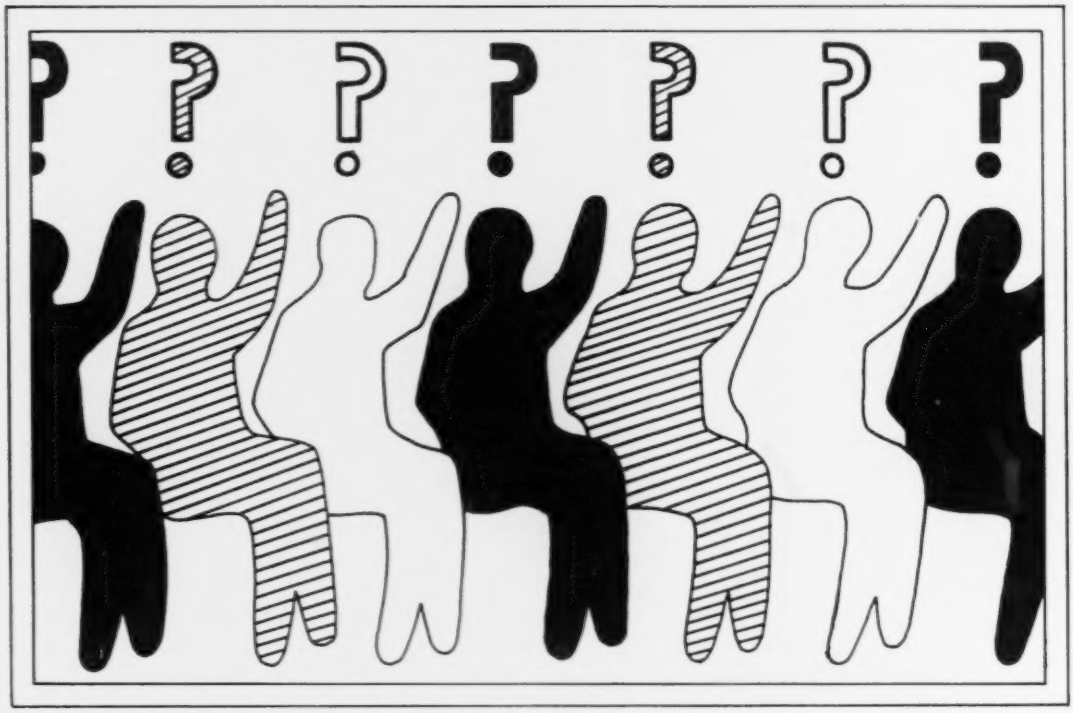
The authority-relationship between TA and student is a delicate structure and must be handled carefully. TAs, as beginners, are often insecure about their authority in the classroom, and can succumb to the

tendency to overcompensate by establishing as much distance between themselves and their students as possible. There have been numerous instances of teachers attempting to elevate their own position through an attitude of contempt for their students. But the very nature of the TA undermines such an attitude. TA and student are learning together. Certainly, the TA has a greater familiarity with the subject matter being taught, but he or she is in no position to claim a monopoly on knowledge. It is, rather, only that knowledge in conjunction with the TA's ongoing participation in the process of learning that empowers him or her with authority. To make a mistake while teaching is not a great crime; to fail to acknowledge it is unforgivable.

The tendency to overcompensate in the opposite direction must also be avoided. For TAs to claim that their common bond as students places teacher and pupil on virtually the same level is to deceive the student into forgetting that the TA ultimately must pass judgement on the student's work. It is a mistake to give the impression that "we're all just friends" when it may be necessary to tell one's "friend" that he or she has failed the course.

What the TA must be, then, is a teacher with the confidence of a student, that is, an individual secure enough to stand in front of a group of people and teach, empowered not by some unquestionable claim to authority, but by virtue of being one who is also earnestly attempting to learn.

In short, the TA is in a unique position to teach by example. He or she is given the opportunity to present students with an example of someone like themselves in the process of thinking. In doing so, the TA can and should draw upon his or her experience not only of the subject matter, but of the world--reading, travel, personal experience--to open the student to the field of knowledge. The student should be confronted with the achievable model of an individual. To the degree that the TA fulfills this task, he or she can serve as a model for teaching as such.



ANTICIPATING UNDERGRADUATE EXPECTATIONS

Most foreign graduate students at the State University of New York at Buffalo have completed their undergraduate programs in their own countries. As a result, they may be unprepared for the characteristic attitudes and behaviors of American undergraduate students. Foreign TAs who come from countries in which university instructors are treated deferentially may be offended by undergraduates who pose challenging questions or who address their TA by his or her first name. These undergraduate students, however, have long been encouraged to question what they are taught, regardless of the source of instruction, and they appreciate an informal learning situation. The undergraduates, on the other hand, may feel that an authoritarian TA and a formal classroom atmosphere inhibit their ability to learn. Although ideally foreign TAs and their students adapt to each other's behaviors, in reality the burden of understanding is on the TA, who must create a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to the teaching/learning process. This section gives a brief profile of American undergraduates and suggests measures that TAs can take in order to establish a productive student-instructor rapport.

How to Get Along with Undergraduates

Jack M. Witt

Many international students who first come to the United States as TAs have expressed difficulties in dealing with and communicating effectively with American undergraduate students. As an experienced TA, as well as a former student of many TAs, both foreign and American, I would like to offer some useful advice based on my experiences.

The undergraduate population at the State University of New York at Buffalo is primarily composed of intelligent and motivated students, most of whom have graduated in the top twenty percent of their high school. A majority of these students are pursuing careers in the engineering, management, health science and social science fields, with the hope of obtaining excellent grades in order to get a high-paying job. Some university instructors will claim that the average undergraduate student is materialistic and very grade-oriented.

Since most TAs are about the same age as the students they teach, with a difference of only four or five years, many undergraduates will prefer an informal atmosphere in which to learn. They like to be able to address the instructor by his or her first name, perhaps sit in a circle, talk about things that are happening outside of the classroom, as well as joke around a little. Regardless of the course that you may be teaching, all undergraduates appreciate it when an instructor asks them what they did during the weekend or how their other course work is progressing. A few of my former TAs used to offer advice, especially to freshmen who were not well acquainted with the university, and the students' attitudes in class became more positive toward the instructor.

Never put your students on the defensive and never threaten them, unless they are being disruptive in class. If students always feel on the defensive, they can make the TA's experience in the classroom very unpleasant. As you are a TA, students may want to challenge your authority because they feel that you do not possess the same power as a regular professor. As a result, students may argue about test results, late assignments and absences, assuming that the TA will give in to their demands for fear of getting into trouble with the department or receiving a bad evaluation. Some undergraduate students may feel jealous because of the amount of knowledge or success that the young TA may possess, and thus may try to disrupt the class. Another important idea to bear in mind is that some students are more sociable than others, and the less sociable or shy students may feel somewhat resentful if the instructor gives attention to or talks more with the sociable students. As a result, they may disrupt the class in order to get the instructor's attention.

Undergraduates clearly appreciate a TA who can relate course material to them effectively. In fact, a majority of my students appreciated having a TA because they felt that a TA would be more concerned with the way in which he or she teaches, as they believe many professors are interested only in research. A concerned TA can stimulate

student interest in a course. After fifteen or twenty minutes on one topic, the students' attention span tends to wane, and they will become bored. Therefore, one of the most common traits that the undergraduates like to see in an instructor is an enthusiastic attitude. On course evaluations students will almost always comment on the instructor's attitude toward students and toward course material. If a TA has a healthy attitude toward the subject matter and can show its relevance to the outside world, the course content will take on added meaning, and perhaps the students' motivation will increase.

Based on the above criteria, I have some suggestions that can benefit the TA, as well as the students:

1. Try to have an informal atmosphere in the classroom. If it is possible, arrange tables and chairs in a circle so that students can meet each other and talk a little. This will increase the probability that students will ask questions and contribute to the class.

2. Allow and encourage questions, and always try to have a sense of humor. Smile, walk around the classroom and call on different students.

3. Tell students <u>why</u> you are doing something, such as a term paper, project, etc. This can help to reduce frustration with the course, which the students may experience. For example, you may want to say that the department or the professor requires that the students have a midterm or that attendance be taken.

4. Be strict with your students, especially at the beginning, with matters relating to attendance, assignments and tests to prevent their taking advantage of you in the future.

5. Always be considerate of your students, even if they may not seem to show you the same respect. In the United States, it is expected that students participate in class. They have the right to disagree with the instructor or the textbook. As a TA, you must be a mediator, and consider other views because if you do not, students will rebel.

6. Be enthusiastic. Your enthusiasm will be communicated to your students and will increase their motivation.

7. Always know ahead of time what you will say and how you will say it. Practice this with yourself at home. Undergraduates become annoyed when they cannot understand the instructor, especially if he or she is foreign, and may complain to the department. If you are well prepared and considerate, students will be much more tolerant of any linguistic deficiencies that you may have. The important thing is to be able to relate the material easily. As you prepare, you can look up words ahead of time and learn their pronunciation and meaning. If you do not understand your students, simply ask them to repeat what they have said; don't ignore them.

8. If a student threatens you by saying that he or she will go to the department to register a complaint, do not worry. Explain the situation to your supervisor as soon as possible so that he or she can help you handle the problem.

9. Undergraduates may tend to be distant and quiet at first, but once you make the first move to communicate, you will find that most of them are very nice and willing to respond.

Undergraduates from the Foreign TA Perspective

Mehran Mostajir

I am currently an instructor at the University Learning Center and I was a TA in the Mathematics Department for two years. I have had freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors and working people at night as my students. When I started my TA assignment in the Mathematics Department, the first thing I noticed was that some students would not attend the classes. This could have been because of the simplicity of the course or because they could not understand the TA. Among the students I had, I found out that the foreign students had an easier time understanding the materials than the American students. The reason for this is probably because of the stronger background that the foreign students have in mathematics. This was significant for the first and second year students, but for third and fourth year students such a problem would not exist because by that time the American students would have had the proper background.

Another thing I noticed was that some undergraduates attending the classes did not do their homework. They were simply there to see the solution on the board and copy it in their notes. These students may have benefited from my explanations, but it was not the best way to take advantage of a class.

My method of dealing with this problem was very simple. I tried to make the students participate in solving the problems along with me. By that I mean that I would ask them questions like:

1. What is the first step toward solving this problem?
2. Why do I want to use this method?

Well, of course, many times students would not respond to my question or would say, "I don't know!", but in my class that was not good enough to avoid answering the question. I would help them in answering the questions and lead them to the solution.

As I said before, some students attend class without having done their homework, but the fact that they attend the class, I believe, is a good sign. It means that they are willing to learn. Since the classrooms are very large, sometimes students do not get the personal attention they need to learn the subject and they look for that attention by attending the recitation. This is something a TA must remember.

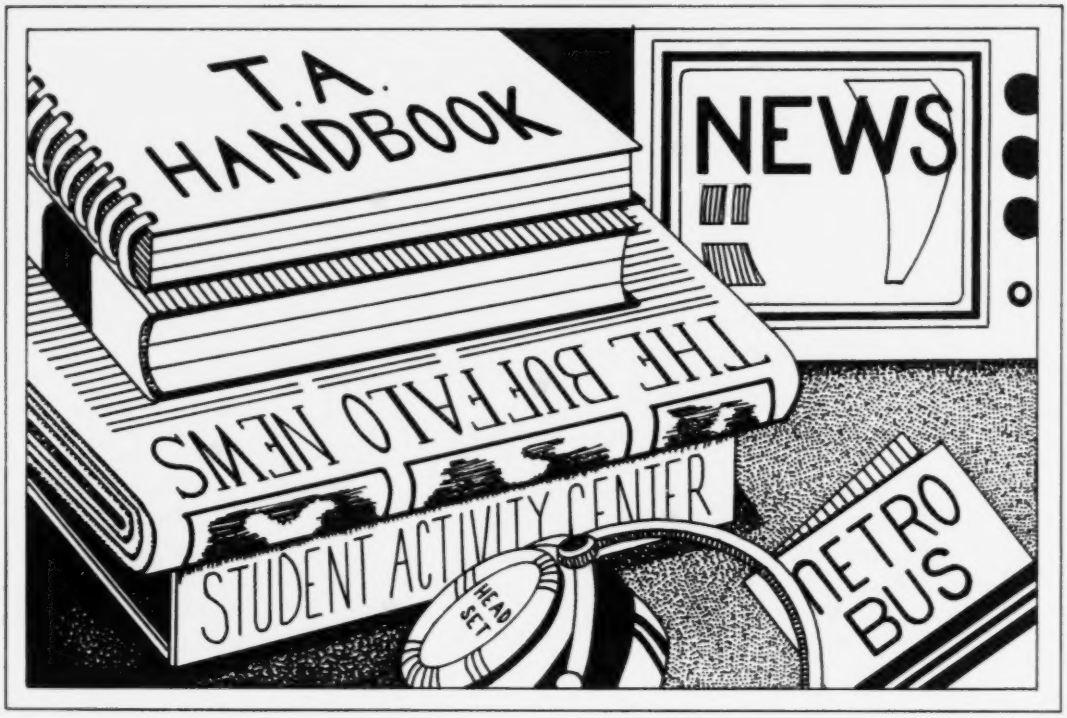
Some undergraduate students seek help by seeing the TA during the office hours. This is a very good time to discover the problems that students are having.

Creating a friendly environment is very important in making the students feel relaxed and comfortable enough to ask questions. Students may be afraid of asking questions simply because they think their questions are trivial and might make them look ignorant compared with

other students. I always encourage the students to ask questions and I tell them, "The question you have might be another student's question. Don't be afraid to ask questions because you are here to learn; that is why you are attending the university."

I like to be sure that students are paying attention to what I say in class, and to do this I sometimes stop writing and ask one of the students to explain to me what I have been doing, or I purposely make an error in solving the problem and find out if anyone notices the error.

I believe there are more things that can be said about undergraduates from the foreign TA perspective; however, the above are among the most important points to consider.



IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Once they arrive at their universities in the United States, many foreign TAs find that communicating effectively with Americans is a difficult task indeed, despite the years that they may have spent learning English in their countries. Suddenly, strange accents, unfamiliar vocabulary and idiomatic expressions become great obstacles to successful communication. Nevertheless, with effort and time, most foreign TAs are able to overcome the language barrier and function well within the university, as well as in the community. Since foreign TAs must possess good language skills, this section offers ways in which foreign TAs can improve their skills and facilitate communication with faculty, colleagues and students.

My Experience with Foreign TAs

Albert Chan

Looking back at my first semester at the University at Buffalo, I cannot help but remember my first experience with a foreign TA. It was in my calculus recitation that I came to know him. I clearly recall the first time I attended his class. He was ten minutes late when he rushed into the room with an armful of books. He did not say anything, but merely scribbled something long and illegible on the blackboard. He did not say what it was that he wrote, and it was not until later on during the class that he told us it was his name. I could not understand him from the beginning, but I did not ask him to repeat because I did not wish to offend him in front of the class, especially on the first day of college. To this day, I still do not know what his name was.

During the entire semester in his class, I can honestly say I did not learn a single thing. It was not because he did not know his subject well, but because he had great difficulty in expressing himself. On top of his bad accent, he had trouble deciding whether he was using the appropriate word or not. Many times, he confused words with different connotational meanings and spoke with bad grammar. With all these problems happening at the same moment, it was nearly impossible to understand anything he said. I felt that on many occasions, the foreign TA could have made the lessons easier for students to understand if he had only spoken at a slower pace. Sometimes, an accent could be ignored if the foreign TA would only slow down when he or she conducts the lesson.

Besides being unable to comprehend what he said, the students often had trouble understanding the lessons in another way. It seemed that the foreign TA failed to notice that he was speaking above the students' level of comprehension. Perhaps it was mainly due to the insufficient amount of time in which the TA had to teach the contents of the book, which the students found difficult to understand in the first place. Nevertheless, it was the responsibility of the foreign TA to explain the complicated lessons in simpler language than the professor had used during regular lectures.

As a student with English as a second language, I understand well how difficult it is just learning the bare necessities to communicate with other Americans. For students who have recently arrived in this country, English can be an extremely difficult language to master. Many foreign TAs have difficulties with the confusing guidelines used for pronunciation of words and for grammar. It is especially true when one realizes how many different dialects exist in this country's different regions. Just looking at the surface of this problem, we fail to realize that the English language that most of these foreign TAs learned was British English. In some ways it is quite different from American English. It is no wonder that foreign TAs find it extremely difficult to communicate the way we do no matter how arduously they tried.

Besides speech problems of the foreign TAs, another problem exists, and it should be corrected to make learning easier and more pleasant for both the students and the foreign TAs. Foreign TAs should be more involved with the university. Most of them devote too much time to studying and it is not healthy. This isolation causes them to have limited confidence in their abilities to handle and solve difficult problems. Often they seem unwilling to socialize and limit themselves by staying within their own ethnic group. By isolating themselves from the rest of the student body, they receive the security of being with their own people. But what they do not realize is that by keeping themselves isolated, they are unable to break free of their own culture. This, in turn, hampers their ability to learn the English language properly. Also, it limits their opportunity to go out and meet people of other cultures and ethnic backgrounds not like their own. If only these foreign TAs would allow themselves to go out and meet people, both the social and learning atmospheres on this campus would be greatly improved.

The Language Barrier Can Be Broken

Sanjay Paul

You have been awarded a teaching assistantship. You are glad, no doubt. But deep inside, you harbor some misgivings. You have been called upon to interact with people whom you consider entirely different. Their language is slightly difficult, their customs appear strange, their lifestyles are different. "How will I measure up to them?" you wonder. You worry that you may encounter a host of problems, notably regarding academic performance, acclimatization and communication. These fears are not unfounded. However, they can be dispelled quite easily provided one is sincere and applies oneself diligently.

Communication, or rather lack of it, may prove to be a stumbling block in your efforts to interact with people. This is not uncommon in the initial period of your stay as you encounter a number of unfamiliar accents and strange phrases. With passage of time, however, you begin to comprehend the language quite well, and soon you find yourself using those very phrases with remarkable ease. As far as accents are concerned, the more you converse with others, the less difficulty you will have in understanding them.

Apart from enhanced interaction, there are other means by which you can improve your command of the language. Reading, for instance, is extremely helpful in mastering the language. Unfortunately, the newly-admitted graduate students do not have much leisure time at their disposal, so they cannot devote much time to reading books. But reading newspapers is another matter altogether. Doing so not only enables you to grasp the language faster, it also keeps you informed of the daily events occurring around you. A healthy interest in world affairs is a perfect complement to proficiency in academics.

For some of you, the significance of television in this country may seem quite enormous. It is, indeed. Television is an integral part of many people's lives. It is undoubtedly a good source of information. Watching television will also enable you to understand different accents and will introduce you to a wide and varied use of the language. You will recognize commonly used phrases and words, and you will begin to understand their meanings and usage. A word of caution, though. The television opens up a whole new world of humor, melodrama, gameshows and information. And you may find yourself watching it more often. It may subsequently prove to be a distraction. Curb the impulse to watch too much television, therefore.

When it comes to talking with others, you may experience certain problems initially. Most of them can be taken care of by speaking slowly and carefully and pronouncing each word clearly. If the subject is of a more technical nature, you may want to write down some of the key words and ideas involved. This process may appear to be laborious; surprisingly, it is not. Moreover, it has the added advantage of getting your ideas across without any ambiguity.

As I mentioned earlier, you may find the language barrier to be rather frustrating and bothersome in the beginning. That is no reason to despair, though. Look around you. You will find that most of the experienced foreign students have picked up the language extremely well and that they do not have any difficulty in communicating with others. Remember to keep your ears wide open and you will soon have no difficulty either.

Some Commonly Used Phrases and What They Mean

Hi!, Hello!, Howdy!	Forms of greeting
How you doin'?	How are you?
Take care, Take it easy, See you later, So long, Have a nice day.	Goodbye

Communicating Without Words

Connie Van Zelm

About five years ago, I spent a summer in Korea and thoroughly enjoyed it. The family I lived with didn't speak much English, and the only Korean I knew was "Annyounghaseyo," "Kamsahamnida," and "Kimchee" (hello, thank you, and Kimchee--you have to taste it to understand!). Despite the language barrier, though, we did manage to communicate and have a great time doing it. How? By using a pen and paper continually, and by making the most of hand, body and facial expressions. Here are a few tips on communication as they apply to being a TA:

1. Become an actor/actress. Great skill is not necessary, just a little boldness. If there's a key word you don't know in English, use your hands, body, and facial expressions to act it out. Don't be afraid of acting silly or looking funny. Do whatever you need to do to get your point across and learn to laugh with the students. For example, try using your hands to demonstrate the difference between "fission" and "fusion." Your students will appreciate your effort and enthusiasm, and you will have a lot of fun.

2. Use a chalkboard (or a piece of paper) continually--whether you're dealing with one student or a whole class. Write down the key words you use as you use them, and draw a simple picture, map, or diagram of what you are talking about. You may not be able to draw a picture of the whole concept--"weather patterns" or "hereditary traits"--but you can sketch examples of what you mean.

3. If you are afraid that someone misunderstands you, draw a picture of what you don't want the students to do or think, and then draw a big "X" through it to show that that's not what you're talking about.

4. When you give instructions for a lab, go through the motions of the lab while you are explaining it--and then do it again, more quickly, to make sure everyone understood.

5. If you don't know the English word for something, but you manage to get the idea across and the students don't know the English word either, teach them the word in your language. Afterwards, pause whenever you use it, to make sure they remember what it means. Learning a few words in another language never hurt anybody, right?

6. Instead of explaining a formula or an equation, SHOW how it works, and if the students don't catch on (understand) the first time, show them again...and again, and AGAIN. Teaching takes patience.

7. Be creative. Visual aids aren't just for children; good language teachers use them all the time, and if you're trying to explain chemistry or physics, you are teaching another language! Have models available whenever you can, and consider using the students themselves to model how something works.

8. As a TA, don't think of yourself as a person with authority over your students--even if you have some. Try to think of yourself as a helper and friend. If you are willing to step out of your shyness and do all you can do to communicate with them, they will really appreciate it, no matter how good or bad your English is.

A good philosophy to remember is, who cares how you say it, as long as you communicate!

Listening Is Speaking

Sungran Cho

I would like to share with you my trials and errors in improving my listening comprehension and speaking skills in English.

I first should say that I could not speak a word in English until I became twenty-two years old. If I met an English-speaking person, I could only smile and make desperate gestures to communicate. I could read books written in English fairly well and could write some in English. But, as you know, one can read and write a foreign language, and still be deaf and mute. One can read and write in Greek or Chinese, but still not speak the language.

Now I can express my thoughts and feelings, ideas and opinions in English fairly well and I teach a course to American students in English. I say I can speak in English, but listening comprehension is inseparable from skill in speaking. While I was fumbling with English, I had to concentrate on listening comprehension first. If I could not "listen to" the sound of flowing and whirling English words, I could not "speak" English, either. Only when I could "listen to" and "comprehend" English, could I begin to "speak" it. Of course, "listening" is far different from "hearing." One can hear sound without comprehending anything one hears. "Listening" means a positive and active hearing which includes "comprehending."

Listening was the first step toward speaking for me. I knew I could not speak English without the memory of the sound inscribed in some corner in my brain. Therefore, I started concentrating on improving my listening comprehension first, instead of forcing myself to make faltering sentences with the help of the vague memory of the words I had read somewhere.

I will tell you what I did. First, one of the most efficient ways of improving my listening comprehension was dictation. I tried to dictate spoken English at a normal speed without any support of written words. I listened to and then repeated cassette tapes of university-level lectures, or conversations, or news. I think it is very important not to see any written words while you are engaged in listening and dictating. I left blanks for the parts I could not listen to, or comprehend. By repeating the listening, the numbers of these blanks decreased. Still, many blanks were left and the whole sentence, or passage, did not make much sense. After several attempts at guessing at the sound and the word, I looked up the written words. From then on, I did not have problems with the specific sounds, or words, I had been struggling with so long. If you make a habit of doing this, there are not many sounds, words, or phrases that you can listen to and not comprehend. I think the unfamiliar sounds of English vary depending on the native tongue of an individual. I still remember I could never grasp the sounds of "I should have been." Those words always sped through my ears as "Ishudobeen," and I would never have thought that the combination

of articulated words "I" "should" "have" "been" could possibly be pronounced as "Ishudobeen." I knew these words and could read them and understand them, but I could not listen to and comprehend them. My eyes, ears, and mouth all functioned at different levels of meaning. Only after I had pinpointed the specific problem by dictation, could I grasp the whole phrase without any problem when each word was not articulated.

Since the problematic sounds of particular words and phrases can be pinpointed through dictation, all you have to do after that is familiarize yourself with the problematic sounds of the words and phrases. For this, I tried to repeat (and memorize) the sound patterns many times in a loud (or normal) voice, imitating the speed, intonation, and accents exactly as they are spoken by native speakers. I think the practice of dictation and repetition (both by ear and by mouth) is especially efficient when one starts learning a foreign language for the first time and tries to familiarize oneself with the different language system.

Second, aside from concentrating on improving listening comprehension, I tried to repeat and memorize important phrases and idiomatic usages of English. Those words and sounds I had once tried to repeat and imitate sank into my brain (or heart?), and now resurface at some most unlikely moments, though I thought I had completely forgotten them.

Third, I tried to add new vocabulary to my memory. Be alert to what others are saying and always keep your ears open. People are important assets. Pay special attention to the new words you meet in books, or in conversations, as if they were your new friends. Try to use them whenever possible, as if you wanted to know your new friends better. It was fun and exciting, and I felt like a curious baby full of wonder.

Then the moment of elation came to me as a surprise. One day, after tedious hours and hours of dictation, repetition, and imitation, I found myself able to speak in English (even in long sentences and similar intonations and accents). The accumulated memories of words gushed through my mouth. This may be an exaggeration, but this is what I felt.

GAINING CONFIDENCE AS A TA

Many TAs, both American and foreign, begin their teaching assignments with little or no previous teaching experience. As a result, even TAs who speak English fluently may find their confidence challenged when faced with the responsibility of instructing classes of American undergraduates. Foreign TAs must consider additional factors that may affect their success as instructors: language difficulties and cultural differences. Nevertheless, foreign TAs should realize that they have been entrusted with the responsibility of teaching undergraduates because their departments have confidence in their ability as instructors. The next section offers suggestions that will help foreign TAs gain the confidence necessary to carry out their teaching assignments.

How to Be a Confident Foreign TA

Amy Chang

There is a Chinese saying which goes, "Knowing yourself and knowing them, you will win a hundred times in a hundred battles." It may be an exaggeration to compare the classroom to the battle field; however, it is essential to know who you are and who your students are to win in the teaching/learning battle. Knowing well what your abilities are, what advantages and disadvantages you have, the role you are playing, and the cultural traits of your students will build your confidence. Compared with native-speaking TAs, your "handicap" may be your oral language proficiency. Although you have passed the mandatory SPEAK test, you might still find yourself caught in situations where you wished you had more vocabulary, especially slang. This language disadvantage can be overcome or compensated for by good preparation and practice, which I think are the best and most important confidence builders.

As a TA, you are expected to know your subject matter well, but this is not enough. You must be able to explain it in a clear, coherent, and well-organized manner. Only good preparation and practice can work magic. Good preparation, in my opinion, means knowing what material is to be covered, writing it either in detail or in outline form for in-class reference, and above all, providing your own examples and comments. You must have a rough idea of how long the material will take to cover, but you should always prepare more than what may be needed. For technical or complex terms or issues, use handouts, charts, or the blackboard; otherwise, students may use your language proficiency as an excuse for their unfamiliarity with the subject matter. If you are a foreign TA teaching in the United States for the first time, I highly recommend that you rehearse what you are going to say in class, especially for the first day of the class.

When I was a TA, in my first semester I usually spent the night before my class writing what I planned to say the next day in a relatively detailed outline form. Then I just rehearsed it by talking to the wall or the pillow. If there were words or expressions I was not quite sure of, I wrote them down and checked them out with a native speaker before my class. This may sound "off the wall" to some of you, and you must think I was a novice teacher. To tell the truth, I had taught the same course in English to university students in my country for two years, using even more advanced English textbooks. I considered my first experience of teaching native speakers in their mother tongue a challenge, and I welcomed it and tried to do a good job through preparation and practice. I believe that to address audiences in a clear and well-organized manner takes both preparation and practice, be it in your native or second language. Have you ever heard about Demosthenes, a distinguished Greek orator who practiced oratory by speaking with pebbles in his mouth? Even an orator practices. We who are generally not verbal or articulate should too. It is practice that makes teaching perfect.

Although your English oral production skills may put you at a disadvantage, you should make the best use of whatever advantages you have. Foreign TAs are believed to be able to present a different view and interpretation of the course material and take an approach to the subject that professors here may not have considered. It is thus recommended that when teaching, you make comments from your own learning/teaching experiences and provide your students with examples for cross-cultural comparison and contrast. This is more feasible for those TAs in social sciences because different approaches can be taken to the same case or issue, which will not only impress but also benefit your students a great deal. Don't just parrot the textbook, which students can read by themselves. Good and interesting examples can not only enliven the class but also enhance students' understanding. Grammar classes, for example, are usually considered to be boring. When I taught English grammar to undergraduates in my country, I discarded most examples the textbook used and spent time making up current and interesting sentences of my own as examples to explain the grammatical rules. Students enjoyed it so much that nobody dozed off in class.

Knowing yourself is not sufficient. It is crucial that you be familiar with the American culture, especially the differences between your and the American educational systems, the roles of a TA, and general student behavior in the classroom. If you come from an Asian country you should realize that a teacher here is not an authority figure and that students here are not passive. You should not dominate the class by lecturing only. You should maintain constant eye contact with your students and encourage and respond to your students' questions. Your role as a TA is more like a helpmate and friend, rather than a god-like figure. You should be willing to assume this role; otherwise, you may upset both yourself and your students.

To familiarize yourself with the dominant culture, seize as many opportunities as possible to become acculturated. It is highly discouraged that you live with people from your own country. If you associate exclusively with your countrymen, you will have difficulty speaking English when you enter your class. You may not speak English with words from your mother tongue in it, but the more often you use your mother tongue, the more features of your mother tongue (accent or intonation, for example) you will retain. Do your best to find opportunities to speak English outside of your home. Join in the social life of the department and the university.

An administrator at the University of Southern California pointed out that American students expect their teachers to be entertainers, to smile frequently, to move around and tell jokes to enliven their lectures. Humor is considered by many educators one of the most important qualities of a good teacher because it keeps students alive and attentive. This does not mean that you have to be a great entertainer in class or joke around all the time, neglecting the subject matter. But it is important to be humorous, although not cynical or sarcastic. It is a pity that not everybody is a born humorist, but humor is something that can be cultivated gradually. You will be more confident when you and your students share a hearty laugh together. Jokes are not too difficult

to "collect." To impress your students, think and prepare some field-related, student-related, or classroom-related jokes from books you read, TV programs you watch or even those told by your former teachers. A word of caution. Some jokes are not transferrable cross-culturally. It may be embarrassing if you are the only one in class who laughs after your own joke-telling. To be safe, check it out with a native speaker and see what his or her response is.

In summary, try to be the kind of teacher you have liked as a student: kind, helpful, friendly and understanding, but at the same time consistent and confident.

Know Thy Strengths and Weaknesses

Sungran Cho

Please note the tone of the double barriers, or hurdles, included in the combination of the adjective "foreign" and the noun "teaching assistant." The people who belong to the category of "teaching assistant" are already on uncertain ground. They are not full-fledged professors yet. They are neither teachers nor students. Or, they are both teachers and students. This transitional status may give any teaching assistant vulnerable moments. Add the adjective "foreign" to "teaching assistant." Language falters. The faces of students are different from those faces one was accustomed to seeing, yes, "back home." These double hurdles may make a "foreign" teaching assistant vulnerable, speechless, breathless, and, yes, depressed sometimes.

I would like to talk about two complementary aspects of how a foreign TA (including myself) can have confidence in his or her teaching: one, emotional, the other, technical.

Foreign TAs can easily be frozen on the podium, murmuring and faltering, if they let themselves be fooled by the invisible ghosts of "fear" and "anxiety." Aside from the difficulty in language, foreign TAs can face an added dimension of difficulty because of emotional factors.

Let me use myself as an example for the discussion of the fear and trembling of a foreign TA. I taught English 201 (Advanced Writing) last semester. In other words, I taught English (writing, reading, analytical skills for various reading materials) to American students. One of my friends said it was absurd. I confess that the ironic situation made me nervous too. The invisible ghosts of fear and anxiety whispered inside of me that students would have doubts and prejudice, and prejudge my teaching based on my different face. I was wrong. The students did not have any pre-conception or prejudice. What I had to fight with was not the prejudice on the part of the students, but the ghosts in me.

To fight "fear" and "anxiety," foreign TAs should fully realize that they are placed in the teaching position because they are qualified. Let the students realize this also at the beginning of the course (of course, in a straightforward manner without any pretension or false authority). Let the students know your strengths and weaknesses as a foreign TA. They will not complain about your being "foreign" if they already know that you are a foreign TA. Instead, they will try to learn something from your differences and strengths.

To me, teaching involves a high degree of "dynamic exchange" of knowledge. It is an exchange, rather than a one-sided monologue. Once you kindle the desire to know about the subject matter on the part of your students, I think serious teaching has already begun. You do not have to be an excellent speaker of English in order to make students understand the subject matter fully. Here are some of the techniques I use to give structure to the course, to stimulate students, and to give myself confidence.

1. I find that careful preparation of the syllabus of the whole course at the outset of a semester is very helpful to give the students and myself a structure. At the beginning of the course, I explain my policy and expectations for the course. More importantly, I also ask the students' expectations for the course (in writing). By doing so, students can put themselves in the position of the active pursuers of knowledge, instead of silent recipients. For me, this is the first step in creating rapport and mutual trust between the students and myself, which are fundamental in gaining confidence in teaching. Once I begin to feel that I have established a rapport and gained the trust of the students, confidence in teaching naturally follows for me.

2. I also use the method of keeping a journal of questions from students. This is a way of maintaining written communication between the teacher and the students about the subject matter and about the class. By selecting some questions about the materials to be dealt with in the next class, again the students become active participants in the pursuit of knowledge. Students can make journals of questions from previous lessons. TAs could develop suitable ways of keeping a journal, depending upon the nature of the courses they teach. But one thing is certain for me. The practice of the journal gives me confidence in teaching since I can locate what the students do and do not know. (If interested in this practice, you might refer to Pat D'Arcy's article, "Putting Your Own Mind to It," in the Borzoi College Reader, edited by Charles Muscatine.)

3. I take an interim poll in mid-semester to know the students' response to the progress of the course. The interim poll is neither the students' evaluation of the course, nor a mid-term exam. Its purpose is to help me know whether the class has been productive (i.e., whether students feel that they understand the materials and are learning from them) and to have suggestions in order to redirect the rest of the course. I think the practice of an interim poll also gives another momentum to the students to reexamine their expectations for the course. Through the interim poll I see how my own teaching has been (and has not been) working, and I can acquire more confidence for the rest of the course.

It is a wonderful experience to teach in a foreign university and I am grateful to the University at Buffalo for offering me the opportunity. Through our multiple perspectives, foreign TAs can stimulate the students and contribute to the university community. As foreign TAs, we also learn as much as we teach from the different setting.

Toward the end of the last semester, one of my students wrote me a letter: "You have profoundly affected me, my life, and my future." Another one wrote: "Your course has reawakened my passion for written expression." Forgive me for my self-indulgence. But I only want to say that foreign TAs can have confidence in their teaching once they overcome their own invisible fear.

How to Become a Confident TA

Paul A. Basinski

Being a stranger in a strange land is a tough situation to be in. Facing the additional challenge of teaching undergraduates in a language other than your native tongue only adds to the problem. Nevertheless, I think that TAs at UB, whether American or foreign-born, all share a common set of problems. Facing those difficulties and eventually overcoming them is one of the most challenging and rewarding things we can do in our early professional careers. Contained below are some teaching tips from my own personal experience - ideas on how to become a confident TA.

First, let's talk generally about confidence. It isn't something everyone is born with. In fact, confidence, like maturity, is an acquired characteristic--it takes time to cultivate and develop it. So my first word of advice to foreign TAs who are tense about facing a group of undergraduates (however big or small) is: don't worry about being nervous. Your students probably feel the same way too. Use that tension and those first day jitters to build a bond between yourself and your students, whose education you are now responsible for. Don't be afraid to say: "This is my first day teaching, English is not my native tongue, and please bear with me." Contrary to opinions suggesting otherwise, students are mature and willing to accept that TAs (foreign or American) are, after all, only human.

What about after the semester develops? How do you build confidence in yourself and in the process become a more effective TA? Here, I can say that one factor seems critical to building up your ego, as well as your faith in your own ability to become a good TA, regardless of where you came from, how long you've been here at the University at Buffalo, etc.

The key element is conviction. You must be convinced of your own powers. The only way you'll ever see confidence grow as an aspect of your character is if you believe in what you do. Have faith in yourself. Don't let your conviction turn into arrogance--students can sense that. On the other hand, work to develop a feeling whereby you believe in the goal you've set for yourself as an educator of youth. The sooner you feel pride in yourself and the worthiness of the profession you've chosen, the quicker you'll feel your confidence develop. After all, Bertrand Russell, a famous British scholar, once said of teaching: "There is no more important profession." Believe in those words, and when you do, your students will give you the respect we all seek. In turn, their admiration will reinforce your own self-confidence.

Another method I use for increasing confidence in my teaching powers, and one I think would be particularly useful to foreign TAs, involves personalizing education. The biggest single complaint of undergraduates about the University at Buffalo is that it's such a huge place; they see it as confusing, alienating, and a hard school to meet people at and feel comfortable in.

Now one of the ways I've found to shrink that gap and build confidence as a TA is by letting the students know something about me. If you're an African or an Oriental, and worried about cultural or language differences, be upfront. Tell the students about the background and culture that you grew up in. More often than not, I think they'll be fascinated. And as students begin to see you not as a foreigner, but as a member of our global community (and a unique one at that), they'll gain respect for you. In the process of personalizing education, not only have you enhanced your own confidence, but you've also helped students to cope with the difficult situation of moving from a small town and tightknit family to a big and often intimidating university environment.

So now you're a confident TA. You've learned that the greatest thing you have going for you is the spoken word. Teaching, tutoring, instructing--they all rely on the ability to communicate difficult ideas in a fluid and interesting fashion. Use the English tongue to your advantage; master the language rather than let it enslave you. And, while doing all this, begin to feel a part of America, of Western New York, and of the University at Buffalo. After all, you're here to get an education as well as to teach others. How much richer your experience will be if you do this with confidence and faith in yourself.

TEACHING A LABORATORY CLASS

In many departments, foreign TAs are given the responsibility of teaching laboratory classes, where they direct demonstrations and practical applications of principles taught in large-group lecture classes. Although such a teaching assignment may seem rather simple, there are ways in which TAs can prepare for these classes so that they give their students the full benefit of the laboratory experience. In the following section, experienced laboratory instructors explain the responsibilities of a laboratory instructor and suggest procedures that can enhance the TA's teaching effectiveness.

Suggestions for Lab Instructors

Robert A. Phillips

One of the most difficult and most potentially rewarding assignments for a TA is that of lab instructor. The difficulty involves giving individual help to students when they need it, and at the same time keeping control of the entire lab section and making sure that it runs smoothly. The reward comes from seeing students, under your guidance, learning actively by carrying out experiments and laboratory exercises. The students should leave each lab with a feeling of accomplishment which they cannot achieve by simply taking notes from a professor's lecture. As a graduate instructor with more than five years of laboratory teaching experience, I would like to make some suggestions for lab TAs.

Laboratory sessions usually begin with a short lecture by the instructor. He or she explains the purpose of the lab, provides any necessary background information, and goes over procedures to be followed by the students. Many instructors view this introductory period as being less important than the "hands on" work that follows. However, the introduction is important. Students need good directions to enable them to carry out the actual laboratory exercise. This is also the instructor's opportunity to emphasize the importance of the exercise, and to create a sense of anticipation in the students.

Once the actual lab work begins, the instructor is usually very busy. Often several students will need assistance at the same time. The lab instructor must be able to give a student some individual attention when necessary, yet not spend too much time when others also need help. This is where the TA's preparation for the lab pays off. The instructor must spend time actually doing the entire lab exercise before attempting to teach it. He or she must be familiar enough with the material to answer students' questions quickly and clearly. In addition to saving time during lab, this preparation also helps to create respect for the TA. Students are more likely to ask for assistance if they are confident of the instructor's ability.

Familiarity with the lab exercise, though, is not in itself enough to ensure good TA-student interactions. The TA should move around the lab, offering advice and suggestions where they are needed. Students should be made to feel that any and all questions are welcome. I have found that once a friendly relationship is established with students, it carries over from week to week. The lab exercise becomes enjoyable for both the students and the instructor.

The TA must be careful, however, not to carry this idea of friendly communication too far. While students should feel comfortable in lab, they must realize that they are there to study and learn. Striking the proper balance is one of the more difficult problems a lab instructor faces, and is largely a matter of experience. Lab work, homework, and lab exams should be difficult enough to make the students realize that high standards are being set for them. High expectations on the part of the TA lead to more learning on the part of the students, and also provide a more lively classroom environment.

In addition to getting to know their TA, students should get to know other students in the lab. The instructor should encourage students to work together when problems arise, and to share particularly interesting results with one another. By explaining something to someone else, the student also reinforces the information for himself or herself. Both students benefit from the exchange, and the TA is free to work somewhere else in the lab.

In conclusion, you should remember that a good TA can make any lab interesting, and a bad TA can make any lab boring. You should be willing to spend the time and effort necessary to be a good TA. Think back to the better lab instructors you had as an undergraduate, and remember how much you appreciated their work. Your efforts will also be appreciated, and in return you will find your teaching experiences more rewarding.

Teaching Advanced Laboratory Courses

Carolyn Wechter

Teaching an advanced laboratory course can be a really enjoyable experience. Classes are smaller, the students are interested in the course material, and they have enough skills to perform involved and challenging experiments. TAs must be prepared to accept the extra responsibilities that they will have. However, the more you put into a course, the more you will get out of it.

The most vital aspect of teaching advanced lab courses is knowing the experiments that you will be teaching. This sounds obvious, but it is essential. The TA not only must spend the time learning the experiment requirements for the course, but must also understand the theoretical principles involved. It is impossible to explain to students concepts that you yourself do not understand. Probably the best way to do this is to perform the experiments yourself. Not only will this allow you to become familiar with the experiment setup, but it forces you to check that all required equipment is present and is in good working order. Unless it is specifically someone else's responsibility, I recommend that the lab be checked before each class and supplies replenished. It is very unlikely that every experiment will work correctly for every student, so the TA must be prepared to solve whatever problems arise, either by physical repairs or by adapting the experiment requirements to circumvent the problem.

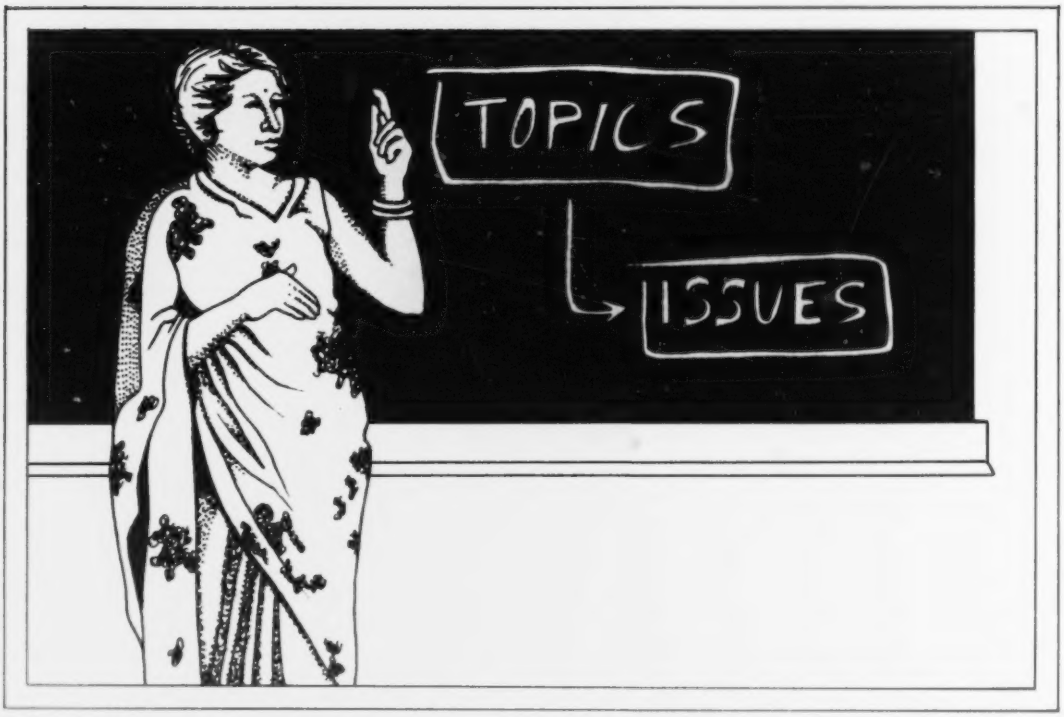
Although each student should prepare for class in some manner (for example, by reading the experiment handout), in practice this does not happen. Many students will walk into the lab without even knowing what type of experiment they will be performing. They will follow the lab procedures word for word, and will probably not read helpful suggestions or admonitions until it is too late. The instructor must be aware of this and advise these students properly.

Students should be encouraged to ask questions. Every question deserves an answer, so the TA should never laugh at even the most ignorant questions. Students will be unsure of their experiment technique and unconfident of their abilities. They will ask questions about both theoretical and practical aspects of the lab and expect the TA to know everything related to the experiment. If you are unsure of an answer, be honest. Explain this to the students, and suggest places where they might find the answer. If it is a question fundamental to the experiment, you should search out the answer yourself.

Many students won't bother asking questions but will perform experiments incorrectly, and perhaps even dangerously. The TA should circulate throughout the lab, and observe what each student is doing. Ask the students questions at various points of the experiment to make sure they realize what they are doing, and to prevent them from following the experiment handout in a "cookbook" manner. When you explain different procedures to the students, allow them to do the actual work. People learn more by doing things themselves than by watching others do them. Watch out for students who get others to do their work for them.

Encourage creativity. Be flexible whenever possible. Students might ask if they could adapt an experiment to explore a slightly different problem, or apply a concept to a real-world situation. They will learn more from experiments in which their input was considered important. Few courses include experiments that do not rely on information learned in prior ones. Remind the students of related material that they have learned previously. This will help reinforce old material, and they will feel more comfortable with newer concepts.

Often in advanced lab courses the students will be able to work independently. This gives the TA time to talk to students and develop friendships. (After all, students are people too.) Knowing students' backgrounds and goals helps you determine their educational needs. If students view you as a friend that they can trust, they will feel comfortable asking questions and expressing their opinions. You will have the opportunity to teach a variety of things, not just those related to the course. If they enjoy a course, students often work harder, and thus learn more. And isn't that our goal?



TEACHING A RECITATION CLASS

Teaching recitation classes involves guiding class discussions so that students have the opportunity to ask questions, express their views and master the course materials. TAs assigned to such classes are often required to review theories, principles and problems that the students have already seen in large-group lectures. While this material may seem clear and logical to the TA, the undergraduate students may find it abstract and incomprehensible. It is up to the TA, then, to explain these technically and theoretically difficult concepts in terms that undergraduate-level students can understand. Clearly, language and organization skills play important roles in conducting recitation classes. In this section, experienced recitation instructors explain the objectives of recitation classes and ways in which these objectives can be met.

Respect and Enthusiasm in the Recitation

Michael A. Biernik

Respect, motivation, and teamwork are the key components involved in leading a successful recitation. These components should be integrated with the teaching and learning objectives that are to be accomplished in the recitation. The problem that arises is that of how to implement these components and to what degree.

The very first objective should be to gain the respect of the students. Avoidance of some common blunders will earn their respect. For example, entering the classroom with the attitude that you are faculty and that the students are "kids" will alienate them. It will hinder both the students and yourself if you start the semester by issuing warnings to the students and by trying to intimidate them. Students will be much better served if you show them that you share common interests and show a willingness to work with them to achieve common goals. It is important to remember that the students and you are all there to learn.

The people that you will be dealing with will generally be at least eighteen years old. They will be satisfied with you if you make clear your goals and requirements, and show a sincere interest in helping them. A major error that I have seen happen many times is a TA's saying on day one, "I don't care whether you come to class or not." This statement may sound harmless enough, but students will interpret it as a TA who is trying to shirk his or her responsibility and who is lacking in sincerity. It is a bad policy to discourage students from coming to class. I am not advocating chasing students around and trying to force them to come to class, but you will gain the respect of your students more readily if you encourage them and give them a good reason to come to class. Therefore, tell the students what you expect and enforce it.

Once you have earned the respect of the students, you should try to keep it by motivating them and keeping them interested in the recitation. Starting the recitation off with, "Are there any questions?", will bring about no response. Does this mean that the students understand everything? Absolutely not! So, instead of just letting the class leave, it is important to be prepared with a practical example, a problem, or elaborative information that will trigger questions and fill in the gaps in their knowledge. While it is important to review what the professor went over in the lecture, it is equally important to be prepared with examples that further illustrate these key points. Regurgitating the lecture will not help the students grasp the concepts. Beginning class with a broad, multiple-step example that leaves spaces for the students to fill in is a good approach. An example that pertains to what the students are responsible for knowing will aid in reinforcing their understanding of the material. It is important to remember that it is difficult for students to formulate questions about topics that they are having conceptual difficulty with. Therefore, it is a function of the TA to review the major concepts and uncover the difficulty. A student that sees results and rewards will stay motivated.

There is one final motivation killer that many TAs are guilty of. That is responding to a question by saying, "That is beyond the scope of this course." This is a terrible "cop out." Certainly as a TA you will not have the knowledge of a professor and you will not be able to answer all questions that are asked, but a recitation is meant to be a discussion. It is important to try to answer questions that expand on course material. It you don't know the answer to a question, tell the students that you will try to find it and that you will get back to them.

The respect and motivation factors will lead to teamwork and friendship factors. It is important to promote a solid working relationship among classmates, and between yourself and the students. Promoting teamwork among classmates can be accomplished by having them work in groups. For example, when you go over an exam or when you return homework assignments, it is a good idea to split the class into a number of groups. Having each group answer questions and explain the answers promotes discussion and aids in getting the students to know each other.

In addition, you can further help your students by making yourself available to help them on an individual basis. As an upperclass or graduate student, you will have acquired more experience in dealing with the problems that a large university can cause. Don't be afraid to make yourself available and give your students some constructive advice. Showing that you are human too will make your recitation flow smoothly.

Suggestions for Recitation Instructors in the Hard Sciences

Zoran Pazameta

Working as a recitation instructor in the "hard sciences" (physics, mathematics, chemistry, etc.) means having to deal with situations unique to these subjects as a whole. These are due partly to the nature of the material (After all, the hard sciences are generally held to be some of the most difficult courses on campus.) and partly to the demands the material makes on the students. As a TA, you must be aware of this and learn to deal with it; you must also take into consideration the varied reasons that your students are taking your course in the first place.

Before I discuss these important points in more detail, let me mention two more things you should keep in mind. First, many of the TAs in the hard sciences are foreign (myself included); we thus have to pay constant attention to our communication skills because, otherwise, the students will quickly become lost, and then resentful and uncooperative, no matter how well we know our material. Second, you may be a TA for a course in which the students are experiencing problems in understanding the material, so you may have the extra task of making up for these deficiencies during your teaching sessions.

As I mentioned above, the course material makes demands on the students which they are sometimes ill-prepared to handle. One of the important things they must adjust to is that they are here to learn basic procedures and problem-solving techniques; no large-scale memorizing is required. In physics, for example, each new section of work usually depends on only two or three new concepts and a similar number of new equations; the assigned problems involve applying these, and/or combining them with material learned earlier. Explaining the purpose and structure of the recitation to students is very important--it gives them a framework to organize their efforts around. You will also find that some students simply can't see how the new material relates to the real world (and some don't seem to care); try to overcome this attitude by using examples of how the material they are learning features in everyday life.

You should also be aware that some of your students, just out of high school, took only the minimum requirements in English, mathematics and science; deficiencies in these mean that they may have trouble reading questions or problems correctly, doing simple math, and expressing themselves in writing. This will directly affect you; you will have to spend valuable class time explaining background math and geometry which should, by now, be assumed knowledge, and you will have to try and grade nearly illegible assignments. To help with the first problem, try handing out a xeroxed revision sheet with the important formulae/relations on it; as for the second problem, all you can do is to remind your students that you can't grade what you can't read.

I should also warn you that many of your students are not majoring in "your" subject, but are taking it as a requirement for something else. This directly affects their motivation; for example, I have found that students majoring in the sciences are generally very motivated and well-prepared in physics classes, while students in other academic fields may lack motivation, have poor high school math/science backgrounds, and show little scientific aptitude.

So, bearing all the above in mind, how do you build an effective teaching session into your small 50-minute time slot? The way I have found works best is to break your time up into three parts. First, start with a "mini-lecture" (10-15 minutes) in which you set out the most important ideas, equations and procedures on which the work is based. Then, show how these are applied by doing a few of the simpler problems (one or two per new idea). Finally, use some of the harder problems to show how the new ideas and methods, in combination, lead to solutions. Try to pick problems that involve all the new ideas; remember, though, that you will very rarely have time to do all the assigned problems, and that you will have to omit the final stages of some problems to save time.

And finally, remember that <u>your</u> attitude will affect the learning atmosphere of the class. Be patient with the class; even if asked the same question ten times in a row, answer it without a trace of annoyance. Be relaxed with the students; work in some humor, if you can. Convey your enthusiasm for the subject to them, and their interest will increase. In a word, try to care. If you do, your students will get the most out of your efforts, and so will you.

Suggestions For Engineering Recitations

Shabbir Aamir

The purpose of recitations is to supplement the class lecture by solving assigned homework problems. Also, since most of the professors do not have enough time to deal with each student individually, recitations provide an opportunity for students to talk directly to someone about their difficulties.

Emphasis should be on the problems which are either difficult to solve or cover the material most comprehensively. Past experience will be the guide in this regard. If you are teaching for the first time, then it is best to ask the students which problems they would like to have solved. It is better to do a few problems thoroughly than to do too many briefly. Where possible, sketches and graphs should be used to illustrate the statement of the problem. This not only helps students understand the problem, which is sometimes half the solution, but also points the way to the correct approach. Assumptions made in the solution and their relation to the theory should be clearly explained. Common mistakes made by the students should be pointed out and the extensions of the problem should be suggested, for example, "What if X were given instead of Y?"

Students should be made to participate, and one of the ways to achieve this is to ask them questions. What should the next step be? What is wrong with that approach? What does this imply? Questions from the students should be welcomed and answered in a way that encourages them to continue asking questions. And if you do not know the answer, just admit it and have the answer next time.

If time is not enough to cover all the material, pre-written transparencies can be used with an overhead projector. On the other hand, the blackboard gives more student participation and is especially helpful if students have to take notes. Also, the development of the material is more natural because students don't feel that it was pulled out of a magic box. Finally, even though your class time is limited, try not to run overtime. Your students will appreciate your consideration for their busy schedules.

KNOWING WHERE TAs CAN GET HELP

At some point during their academic programs, all TAs, both foreign and American, encounter problems. However, the State University of New York at Buffalo has anticipated these difficult areas and has established University resources designed to help TAs perform their teaching responsibilities and succeed in their academic programs. Some University offices deal specifically with the concerns of international students. Whatever problems foreign TAs may face, help is available. The following section describes the University offices, programs, organizations and courses that may be of assistance to foreign TAs.

University Resources

The State University of New York at Buffalo makes available a variety of resources to assist TAs in both their teaching assignments and academic programs. Although not exhaustive, the following list includes some of the most helpful sources of information and assistance for foreign TAs.

Department Supervised Teaching, Peer Assistance or Orientation Programs. Many departments offer a supervised teaching course, TA peer assistance or an orientation program to assist TAs in their first semester of teaching. TAs should contact their department supervisor, Director of Graduate Studies, or department secretary for further information.

Intensive English Language Institute (IELI), 320 Baldy Hall, Amherst Campus, Tel.: 636-2077. The IELI offers courses in speaking, writing and reading to international students who wish to improve their English language skills. Each semester, IELI also offers "Communication Skills for Foreign Teaching Assistants" (ESL 512), a course designed to improve the speaking and listening skills of foreign TAs and to prepare them for teaching at the undergraduate level at the University at Buffalo. Foreign TAs registered in ESL 512 will review their own videotaped oral presentations and will interact with University at Buffalo undergraduates. In addition, the IELI administers the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK) Test during Foreign Student Orientation or by appointment to foreign teaching, research and graduate assistants and to foreign students applying for assistantships.

Language and Learning Laboratory, 126 Clemens Hall, Amherst Campus, Tel.: 636-2333. The Language and Learning Laboratory maintains facilities, equipment and educational materials related to language instruction. Here students have access to the Intensive English Language Institute's large collection of English language cassettes which can be used in the language laboratory or which can be duplicated in the language laboratory for home use to practice pronunciation, grammar and listening comprehension. An IELI staff member is available to assist students in selecting cassettes.

Effective University Teaching (LIS 597). Sponsored by the University and Graduate School, Effective University Teaching (LIS 597) is a course which presents in a practical manner the major findings, research and techniques to help improve the quality of graduate assistant teaching at the University at Buffalo. Upon completion of the course, TAs should be able to systematically plan a university course, identify over twenty teaching techniques, apply effective management of learning concepts, develop meaningful evaluation (teaching and learning) instruments and develop their own theory and philosophy of university teaching. TAs should contact the School of Library Studies, 381 Baldy Hall, Amherst Campus, Tel.: 636-2412.

Educational Communications Center (ECC). ECC provides a variety of educational media services to the faculty, staff and students at the University at Buffalo. Among its many services are delivery and set-up of audiovisual equipment for classroom use (Audiovisual Equipment Services, 24 Capen Hall, Amherst Campus, Tel.: 636-2803) and booking and scheduling of Media Library instructional films, slides and tapes (Media Library, 24 Capen Hall, Amherst Campus, Tel.: 636-2803).

State University of New York at Buffalo Handbook for Graduate Assistants and Fellows, available at the Office of Graduate and Professional Education, 549 Capen Hall, Amherst Campus, or at University departments. The Handbook provides information on University policies, procedures, services and resources that concern graduate assistants, including TAs. One section of the Handbook is intended for first-year TAs and includes suggestions on preparing for teaching responsibilities and improving teaching effectiveness. This section also contains information on the Excellence in Teaching Awards for Graduate Students, on academic rules and regulations for registration and on grading for undergraduate students.

Office of International Student and Scholar Affairs, 409 Capen Hall, Amherst Campus, Tel.: 636-2273. The primary services of the Office of International Student and Scholar Affairs include immigration and related legal assistance, referral and assistance with transition and adaptation to a new educational and cultural environment, and consultation with faculty, staff and others concerning issues and concerns associated with international exchange.

Graduate Student Association (GSA), 102 Talbert Hall, Amherst Campus, Tel.: 636-2960. As the graduate student government, the GSA represents graduate students to the faculty, staff and administration of the University and acts as an advocate of graduate student opinions, needs, rights and responsibilities within the University. The GSA also provides many services and activities for graduate students. A coordinator for international graduate students addresses the specific concerns of these students. Through the GSA office, graduate students may also apply for Graduate Resources Access Development (GRAD) Project grants for financial assistance in completing master's or doctoral theses.

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